THE ANARCHIVIST

History, Memory, and Archives

Geof Huth
Who gets to have a voice?

Who gets to have an archive?

bell hooks, Talk at a session of the 2017 Archives Leadership Institute (Berea College: Berea, Kentucky, 28 June 2017).

#archivesquotes
They don’t want to seek a usable past.

They want to be a usable past.

Daniel Horowitz Garcia, Plenary (Society of American Archivists, Cleveland, 20 August 2015).

twitter #archivesquotes #SAA15 #storycorps

Foreword

BY TERRY BAXTER

The first time I really got to know Geof, he was in my hotel room swigging bourbon from the bottle before unbuttoning his shirt to exhibit the relatively fresh scar running the length of his breastbone. He had had open heart surgery the year before. In his case, this required cutting through the skin, sawing the sternum in half and using a chest cracker to expose his heart for repair. It must have worked. It’s a decade later. The scar is faded. Geof is a grandfather.

I always think of Geof in relation to symbols. I was going to say in relation to words. But I have sat for hours with him in meetings while he drew elaborate fidgetglyphs. These mysterious combinations of lines, curves, arrows and dots have a delightful aesthetic. For Geof, they also serve as symbols, documenting what he observes and providing a means to recall that scene in his own peculiar way.

Even more important to Geof are the symbols we call words. While he often plays with them for sheer entertainment, he mostly manipulates them—both in speech and in print—to convey his thoughts and emotions to a wide variety of audiences. That words are Geof’s lifeblood is evidenced by his prolific written output. From published works to performed works to blogs and social media to correspondence.

While he’s claimed that he’s always been an archivist, I know that he chose this calling in his twenties after considering life as a lexicographer. He had been a persistent anti-archivist until then, destroying most of the records he had created in his youth—journals, correspondence, pictures. But that has changed. When asked about himself, he has said: “you can find [it] in my personal papers. All is on view. Nothing is hidden. I’m someone often very open and also someone considerably hidden.” Geof documents all aspects of his life for others to see. “It’s what archivists do,” he once told me.

So what does it all mean? Geof has written, “I’m in the memory business because my memory is faulty.” There is something to that, but I feel his memory busi-
In attic or attic-adjacent storage, the occasional dead pigeon or bat was a common sight. And one city in the state stored a good portion of its records in a giant hole dug into the soil in the basement.

What I’ve learned about dirt and dust is they are merely part of the natural process of entropy in any paper recordkeeping system. Insofar as archivists dispel dirt and maintain order, they hold the natural process of disorder at bay. A single scrap of paper not lifted off the floor, an individual document not returned to its specified location after use, the passage of enough time to allow dust to become visible on a shelf—all of these initiate a movement toward disorder, one that will continue through the also natural process of inertia unless the archivist counteracts the direction of that inertia. To keep a place clean and orderly, one needs action but one needs more importantly the rhythm of routine. We can accomplish even a despised task if the process of regular routine makes it natural to us, allows us to carry out the task without thought, in a state of blank meditiveness—which is how we make an act inertial.

The presence of a bright, clean archives is part of the evidence of the archivist’s work and value. We are proud of the sterile appearance of our archives and the physical perfection of the arrangement of boxes upon shelves. When a user opens a box of ours and sees a sequence of crisp folder tabs labeled neatly and cogently in pencil, we realize our work is visible because they see it. This explains why archivists decry references to archives as “dusty,” while sometimes even decrying that archives are never dusty, dark, or dirty—even though they occasionally are.

Order is evidence of the work of the archivist. Disorder is evidence of the lack of an archivist.

Or so we desire it would be.

Truth is I have worked with many messy archivists, too. I am relatively neat, but I can allow disorder to invade and overtake my work spaces. Lack of time, more than lack of will, may be the cause of this, but an incomplete willingness to act promptly is still a cause of my disorder. I shared an office once with a great archivist, friend, and man who had no ability to keep a tidy office. After he opened an envelope to read a letter, he would drop the envelope onto the floor—despite my entreaties that he use a trash bin instead. By the time he retired—and this is not an exaggeration—the floor of his office was almost a foot deep with paper, except for a narrow pathway to his desk and enough space to allow him to operate his rolling chair relatively unimpeded.

Yet such personal habits of archivists in their own spaces is not of crucial concern to us. It does not matter how we manage our own affairs. What matters is how we manage the archives: the records, the space, and the organization. Our profession extols order—and not just physical order. We require controls to protect the archives and make them discoverable and knowable. We restrict access to storage areas. We require users to follow certain rules that protect the records, because protecting the records ensures their survival and continuing re-use.

Order is our guiding principle. Even if good order is not one of our personal habits, it remains our defining characteristic. So when I’m working in the dirty archives where I now work for part of my time, I struggle towards order and
I am not an historian, and I never wanted to be. This is an important fact to understand before I speak.

People with some idea of what archives are, including archivists themselves, sometimes tie archives to history a little too tightly. They state, baldly, that archives are the stuff from which history is written, which is almost and also partly true. History does not depend solely on records. Reminiscences, newspapers, artifacts, physical sites of human habitation, and even various secondary sources also serve to support the production of history. Archives are not sole source. The primacy archivists give to archives in this regard should not imply that archives are our only portals to the lost worlds of the past.

But archives are also not merely the handmaiden of history. Archives must represent the most abundantly valuable slivers of the universe of lived experience. They are always about the past, because the moment after we create a record it serves to remember that past. But the past is not merely the province of history as we usually imagine it: that field within the humanities focused on interpreting and contextualizing the activities of humans in the recorded past.

Archives must also preserve scientific data, and not simply for the stories about the people who created it or the advances they made possible—but also for the possible scientific reuse of those data. Archives sometimes must save data merely to allow us to administer the present, as well as understand the past. Archives must save records of how artists and writers worked, how philosophers fashioned their ideas, how humans molded the planet Earth into a thing never before imagined. Archives must be about all intellectual and social achievements and missteps of humanity. They must give us insight into how people fashioned their worlds—worlds otherwise lost to us. But the focus of archives as a broad human activity must be, instead, no focus at all. Instead, we need to create a view of every major segment of human activity, not merely one on history writ small.

To give a rough working definition of history, let me say that history is the remembered or recorded past. Certainly, we sometimes use the term to mean anything that happened in the past, whether stored as data or held in a body as memory. But history is generally regarded as that part of the past we can remember be-

Extraordinary collections deserve a proper home, in all respects.

embrace because it appears to have a cold clinical feel to it. History carries, ever within itself, as a word, the concept of story, so it seems to be the manifestation of the human urge to tell a tale that will move another.

But data is our province. I became an archivist not because I wanted to be an historian but because data, in all its multitudinous forms, entrances me. We are the only creatures who preserve our thoughts or record our movements. Data is evidence of the human, and it always is, even when the human per se is not its focus. Data is how we remember before our lifetimes began and how others remember us after those lifetimes end.

If we pretend to be historians, or even if we believe that the work of archives is history, we abandon the richness of human experience. We cut off most of the world to look backwards through a spyglass at the ever-diminishing past. We become blind to the horizon, to the curvature of the earth, to the movements of the planets, because all we see is one speck of humanity, rich and vital, but now far away, because we have torn it out of the whole, because we have isolated it.

Because we have decided to love the fragment detached from the organic and universal whole.
cords knowable. I do this by trying to grasp the entirety of the records hoard, by developing personal knowledge of all the courts, all the series, all the processes that made these records. The necessary next step is to record the knowledge I have collected or created—whether that information came from the records themselves, from the work of previous custodians, or from outside sources (such as, commonly in my case, the chapter laws of New York).

And determining how to present contextualizing knowledge is my most difficult job, and the one I am least sure I complete successfully. The easy part is dealing with contextualization at the series level. All the metadata we assemble to make a series understandable: the series title (often created by the archivist), the date range (sometimes a mystery to the creator), and the series description. It is in the last that archival contextualization takes its honored place. By describing what we’ve learned about the records (and also about the creator and its processes), we provide some basic context for understanding the records. This may seem superfluous sometimes, when records seem perfectly clear in their purpose and intent, but many records are opaque to users even if transparent to archivists. And I—standing in for the archivist at the moment—discover almost every week records that are a total mystery to me, until I take the time to allow the records to tell me what they are. Our job is to remove the process of deciphering the general meaning and purpose of the records so the user can focus on understanding what the record might valuably reveal.

I like replacing the term “finding aid” to “knowing aid.” The finding aid focuses on allowing users to find records, a valuable goal but one lacking in depth of purpose. The knowing aid helps people interpret the records accurately, understand them in their natural and extranatural contexts, and know the records. Knowing is key. Records can be cryptic, inscrutable, unknowable. Our job is to create as much of a contextual superstructure as the user will need to make sense of the record. This might mean explaining the processes and reasons why organizations or individuals created records, how interconnected organizations (such as various courts in a system of courts) fit and operated together, or how the archivist determined that records found physically remote from each still formed a single series.

The possible types of context an archivist could document are practically infinite, so we need to determine what context is the most essential—which sometimes might be the context most likely to slip out of the realm of human knowledge. Since our project is knowledge, the creation, maintenance, and expansion of knowledge remains our primary goal. We should remember this, and remember that we do this for the future, which is the only world left for us to enlighten.
But this definition assumes preservation means the preservation of the original carrier medium. If the medium persists, then the records exist. This is a dictum so central to our profession that no one mentions it. As most dicta, it is only partially true. Across the millennia, preservation has also been achieved by transferring the information in a record from one medium to another.

In the wide era before the onset of printing, manuscripts were copied onto new pages both to create new copies and to revive an overused copy before it fell into total dissolution. The transfer of information from paper to paper or parchment to parchment helped preserve the information—in part because lots of copies kept stuff safe centuries before we acronimized that concept.\(^1\) We extended this concept of replacement as preservation with the implementation of microfilm. A basic point of microfilming was always to reduce the quantity of physical space records inhabit, but it was also used as a preservation tool. An archives might microfilm a most treasured set of records, retain those in their original form, and require users to access the information via the resulting film. They might also keep a master copy of the microfilm far off site to ensure they had a safely distant backup of the records. Or the archives could even replace the paper records with the microfilm itself, thus producing a form of preservation where the original was discarded in place of the more durable copy.

That plan often ran into problems. Microfilm is high-grain photographic film, so it can capture detail exquisitely, so long as you microfilm expertly and all the detail required can be captured in black and white without significant loss of information. Even if both those were true, users often faced\(^2\) microfilm readers of such low quality that interpreting a clear image of a faded document on a fuzzy microfilm screen reduced access to the information because it slowed down the ability of the person to read the text. This scenario does not even raise the issue that moving the length of a reel forward at a brisk clip—the machine whirring and hissing as it went—left many users (including me) nauseated by the time they arrived at the frame they had been in search of. Still, it is difficult to argue against microfilm as a preservation medium. If it is polyester-based,\(^3\) it is generally rated as having a life expectancy of 500 years, and storing microfilm in the proper environment is relatively inexpensive.

Preservation isn’t clear cut. We don’t always know if we have achieved it, or if we can maintain it.

With the acceptance of digitization as a preservation methodology, we have begun to expand our concept of preservation. However, many people still do not accept digitization as a preservation solution, because the preservation of digital materials (the resulting images, in this case) is more difficult than for hardcopy ones. Formats change, digital records standards change, and being digital means constantly renovating our data management systems: updating hardware and software, migrating files occasionally to new file formats, even tearing down one system to replace it in toto with another. Preservation aims for stability, but its processes aren’t stable; they must change as needs and technology change.

Digitization, however, brings with it a deeper incarnation of what replacement preservation is. When we microfilm a document and dispose of the paper, we are left with a black and clear image on a piece of polyester. We have not captured the document in all its details: not its color, not the grain of the paper, not its feel nor its scent.\(^4\) Although microfilm is fine grained, digitization can capture nearly infinitely finer detail and also capture color, thus providing something closer to the aura of the original document—which look and feel is often lost when the document is reduced to black and white. The digital provides a copy we can zoom in on to see the details of the paper and the letters upon it. The digital more accurately represents the record’s first or earliest captured state.
The record—in a real sense, and not just the missing third of it—had been lost. Preservation was impossible because knowability had disappeared.

Constructed metadata comes later, because it is metadata not native to the record itself. Archivists create constructed metadata to do one of two things: to ensure or increase the knowability of a record. I believe archivists often create more metadata needed and create granular metadata more frequently and with greater vigor than they do collective metadata. Sometimes, we must create metadata to make records more accessible for users, and that is what granular metadata does. For instance, I created a system of granular and inherent metadata (the names of people, actions, locations, and dates). What we do a little less is build systems of collective metadata that put bodies of records in context with other bodies of records so users can understand them better.

In my work, I have virtually eschewed granular metadata, except in the case of the occasional folder title. My focus has been on collective metadata, which provides information on sets of records. Ancient court records and the processes that cause their creation are often inscrutable to people new to them, so I developed tools to help people understand the processes. Sometimes, the tool might be merely a note in a series description explaining the sequence of steps in a legal process, thus giving the user a way to determine which document would have come first and which would be the response to it. Other tools included a glossary to explain the meaning of old legal terms, especially those in Latin and the few symbolic abbreviations. (What I could not provide was a guide to reading secretary hand, though I addressed that issue by noting in the series description the writing system used—to help the user find a tool to help them decipher the script.) I created a thirty-six-page document on writs, which explained the categories of writs, each individual type of writ and its purpose, provided illustrations of each type (since different writs took different shapes), and I included a visual guide that located and explained the identifying information (let’s say, metadata) found on the front of writs. I also created regnal calendars, so users could quickly identify the year of a document occurring in March during the second year of the reign of George III. Unexpectedly, I had to produce one such calendar for years of independence, since the courts of New York identified the year of a document by the year of the country’s independence for nearly fifty years.

I focus on collective metadata, which is more difficult and time-consuming to produce, because it helps preserve records by preserving—or at least presenting—the various contexts in which those records operated. And I do this for another, related, reason:

Granular metadata makes records findable. Collective metadata makes them knowable.
a means by which the student body identifies itself and the reason by which they donate to the school as alumni.

Time and again, this issue arose. I attended the fall meeting of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference this year and sat in a session on records of collegial sports—specifically because I have no interest in sports but I have interest in my friend Alan Delozier, who was speaking. What I learned was the value of sports memorabilia, whether record or artifact, and how that interest can actually help financially support an archives. A few weeks later, Kerri Anne Burke, Alan’s wife, mentioned during the recording of a podcast of Karen’s and mine that showing employees of Citi certain foundational or interesting documents literally connected them with their organization, even one that large. 4

I don’t overly care that the symbolic value of archives can help archives fund and support their operations, but we live in a world where money indicates value, so we should allow people to understand what they will value in the records of our organizations. We need to live in the real world, where money counts, but also where the heart guides where the money goes. We also need to guide ourselves by the heart as well as the head. Because the heart will tell the head where to go, and the heart will often be right. The only significant writing I’ve encountered discussing symbolic value was written by James O’Toole and published in 1993. 5 and O’Toole focused primarily on foundational documents, instead of the vast array of items, even non-records, held by archives.

Our interest in symbolic value must exceed the bounds of the Declaration of Independence and the Domesday Book. We must identify the symbolic value we personally feel and that we know others will feel. We must think broadly about the symbolic value different groups of users will find in our records. We must accept that the value of our records does not reside merely within the essential data they hold.

Value persists because of the visual traits, the historical resonance, and even the scent of records—diversifying its value beyond information alone. This value may require us to save records in their original forms because only the object carries this magic within it. We have to do this not just because we hope it will provide archives with money or interest others in our records. We must do this because we do our job well when we make it possible to realize all of the value and all the values of our records.